Distr.
GENERAL

IDB.8/43
25 June 1991

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Industrial Development Board

Eighth session
Vienna, 1-5 July 1991
Item 22 of the provisional agenda

JOINT UNIDO/UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE SERVICE

Report by the Director-General

Summary

Relates historical background on conference service arrangements at Vienna-based organizations, reports on recent proposals by the Secretary-General of the United Nations for a unified service and gives UNIDO response to those proposals.

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I. BACKGROUND

1. The UNIDO conference service was established in 1967 and, in the late 1970s, assumed the responsibility for United Nations bodies transferred by then to Vienna from Geneva and New York. Since 1986 there have been two joint services: Languages and Documentation Division administered by UNIDO and Meetings Planning and Interpretation Service administered by the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), each making selected components of conference servicing available to both organizations. Since its inception, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has operated a conference service of its own. The question of organizing conference servicing facilities at the Vienna International Centre into a single operation was initiated in 1984 by the General Assembly in its resolution 39/68/A.

2. In 1985, the Director-General of UNIDO expressed strong reservations on establishing, at that time, a unified conference service under the United Nations (A/C.5/40/7, para. 5). During consultations among senior officials of the United Nations, UNIDO and IAEA undertaken in October 1985, no agreement was reached concerning the need to proceed at once with the establishment of a unified conference service under United Nations administration. The report of the Advisory Committee for Conference Services at Vienna, which finalized the 1986-1987 deliberations on the subject, registered the position of UNIDO representatives that "there is no convincing reason to change the present set-up of the joint services between the United Nations and UNIDO".

II. RECENT PROPOSALS

3. UNIDO is willing to consider all suggestions for a more efficient and cost-effective organization of conference servicing in the Vienna International Centre provided that they correspond to the interests of the organizations concerned. In keeping with this approach UNIDO has been analysing the latest proposal of the United Nations Secretary-General as presented in documents A/C.5/45/30 and A/C.5/45/32 and, most recently, in document A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1 entitled Unified Conference Services for the United Nations Organizations at the Vienna International Centre. At the request of the United Nations Secretariat in New York, the latter was circulated at the seventh session of the Programme and Budget Committee of UNIDO.

4. The position of UNIDO on the subject was highlighted in documents A/C.5/45/62 and A/C.5/45/63 as well as in the report of the Advisory Committee on Conference Services at Vienna of 22 February 1991 and it was made known to the Member States at a briefing organized by UNIDO and IAEA on 14 March 1991 and to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) at its 1991 spring session, in Vienna.

V 91 26062 0705E

Distr.: 27 June 1991

5. The current United Nations proposal differs drastically from the concept of a common conference service at Vienna, that is, of a service which would have taken care of the three organizations operating at the Vienna International Centre. Apart from the proposed rearrangement involving interpretation services, the United Nations proposal is limited to only two of the three organizations, namely UNOV and UNIDO.

6. There are two elements in the proposal: the unification of existing joint conference service components administered by UNIDO and UNOV and the vesting of authority in UNOV for managing the unified service, which would involve the transfer of the Languages and Documentation Division to the administration of UNOV.

III. UNIDO RESPONSE

7. The proposed unification of the two joint service components - which are at present self-sufficient and self-sustained units - would not provide any qualitative changes because there is no overlapping of functions in the two units, and therefore no posts could be dropped. The work process in either unit would not be improved as a result of the unification. It would not enhance the existing coordination in matters related to the planning of meetings, which is the only area of common interest to both units. Thus, the unification would not improve efficiency nor would it generate any savings.

8. The proposal to transfer the responsibility for the Languages and Documentation Division to the United Nations Office at Vienna has substantial financial implications. The additional personnel and financial responsibility for the staff to be taken over from UNIDO would be considerable. At present, the administrative structure of UNOV employs about 400 staff members who have stable contractual status and require only routine personnel and finance processing. The Languages and Documentation Division, managed by UNIDO, numbers 170 established posts and recruits annually about 100 work/years of temporary assistance which requires the processing of up to 700 contracts per year. If the Division were placed under the authority of UNOV, administrative support is estimated to require about 15 additional Professional and General Service posts at a cost of up to $1.8 million per biennium. These additional support costs would not lead to an increase in effectiveness and efficiency. Moreover, since the present set-up functions to the satisfaction of both organizations, such an expense is totally unwarranted. Cost-sharing such an increase in expenditure would run counter to the zero-growth budget policy pursued by UNIDO and hence is not acceptable.

9. Paragraph 24 of the report of the Secretary-General A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1, suggests that transferring the administering authority to the United Nations could offer the following benefits to a unified conference service: integration of Vienna into a global network of conference services; participation in the United Nations telecommunications system; substantive and technical support; access to world-wide competitive examinations and training for linguistic staff; and opportunities for career development. In the view of UNIDO, these advantages can be realized within the present set-up and can be introduced through the productive inter-agency cooperation that already exists between United Nations and UNIDO. Improvement and broadening of that cooperation should be an important item on the agenda of the joint Advisory Committee on Conference Services at Vienna.

10. On the other hand, some observations made in the report merit close attention. The proposal on rearranging the interpretation component at the Vienna International Centre (VIC) offers a more rational configuration than the present one. It provides for the interpretation services to be reimbursed at the local free-lance interpreter rate, and when United Nations interpreters are not available, the United Nations would recruit free-lance interpreters with all costs to be reimbursed by the requesting organizations. The rates and arrangements suggested are reasonable and the proposed changes would have no adverse effect on the staff. UNIDO believes that the interpretation component should be reshaped without delay along the lines suggested in the report and start servicing the three organizations at the Vienna International Centre with effect from 1 January 1992.

11. UNIDO would support the proposal to establish 11 Professional and 11 General Service posts by converting a corresponding amount of temporary assistance funds. This idea is based on the recommendations made by the external auditors in 1989. The suggested conversion would not increase expenditure but would lead to savings, since the cost of employing regular staff is considerably lower than free-lance rates. Moreover, the creation of these 22 posts, along with the establishment of a number of the General Service posts as suggested in the report of the Secretary-General (para. 31), would also regularize the contractual status of those staff members who have remained for years on short-term contracts without any prospect of stable employment within the United Nations system. However, it should be stressed that UNIDO does not agree to make the suggested conversions subject to the change of administering authority. This useful measure can and should be administered within the present set-up and at the earliest convenience.

12. UNIDO regards with deep concern the provision in paragraph 43 of document A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1 calling for the establishment of a separate United Nations conference service at the Vienna International Centre if no agreement is reached on the establishment of a unified service. Splitting the existing joint services would compromise the goal set by the Joint Inspection Unit in 1984 to explore the prospects of establishing a single conference service for the three organizations operating at the Vienna International Centre. It would run counter to the recommendations reached in 1987 by the Advisory Committee on Conference Services at Vienna, namely that the existing joint services arrangement between the United Nations and UNIDO should be continued and any split should be avoided. The establishment of two separate services would eliminate the present advantage of flexibility in adjusting the staffing level according to the fluctuating workload for the two organizations. Administrative and support functions of the two separate services would be massively duplicated. Preliminary estimates show that the total consumption of worktime might increase by nearly 15 per cent which, cost-wise, would constitute about $4.0 to $4.5 million per biennium.

13. An analysis of document A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1 helps to identify a number of important areas that still require clarification and thorough systematic consultations between the United Nations and UNIDO.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

14. The foregoing considerations bring UNIDO to the conclusion that, with the exception of the interpretation component, conference servicing arrangements between the United Nations Office at Vienna and UNIDO should be continued without change; that the Secretary-General's proposal that UNOV assume responsibility for the interpretation service at the Vienna International Centre on the terms suggested in paragraphs 32 to 40 of the document A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1 should be implemented as of 1 January 1992; and that other points of the report related to the conference servicing at the Vienna International Centre should be made the subject of inter-agency consultations within the framework of the joint Advisory Committee on Conference Services at Vienna.

V. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE BOARD

15. The Industrial Development Board may wish:

(a) To take note of the present report of the Director-General and the report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Unified Conference Services for the United Nations Organizations at the Vienna International Centre (A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1);

(b) To agree that, with the exception of the interpretation component, the conference servicing arrangements between UNIDO and United Nations at Vienna should continue as at present;

(c) To recommend that the proposal providing for the United Nations to assume responsibility for the interpretation services for the three organizations at the Vienna International Centre should be implemented as of 1 January 1992;

(d) To further recommend to continue, on a regular basis, the systematic analysis of the conference servicing requirements and facilities of the Vienna-based organizations within the framework of the joint Advisory Committee on Conference Services;

(e) To request the Director-General of UNIDO to transmit to the United Nations Secretary-General and to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions the views and recommendations of the Board with regard to the proposals contained in the report A/CN.1/R.1136/Rev.1.